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SUBJECT: AI Update: Guangdong Suspected Human AI Case
Proves Negative

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 11, the front-page headline of
the South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported a second
suspected bird flu case in Guangdong Province and a mainland
news blackout on the subject. Guangdong's only confirmed
human AI death occurred on March 2. Subsequent
investigations by Consulates Guangzhou and Hong Kong
revealed the suspected case to be negative. The incident is
an important reminder that media sources have their own
interests. Moreover, the Guangdong Foreign Affairs Office
should be applauded for its relative timely response. END
SUMMARY.

2. (U) The April 11 South China Morning Post (SCMP)
headline read "News Ban for Guangzhou's Suspected Second
Bird Flu Case, Sources Say". The story was based on a
source at the Guangzhou No. 1 People's Hospital, which said
a 41-year old woman resident of Guangzhou municipality, Ms.
Li, was admitted on March 25 with unexplained pneumonia.
The SCMP reported that on March 30, the Ministry of Health
informed the World Health Organization (WHO) in Beijing.
Thus far local Guangdong media has not covered the issue at
all. Guangdong's only confirmed human AI death occurred on
March 2 (RefTel C). The victim was a Guangzhou resident in
his 30s, who was known to frequent "wet market" (live animal
markets) throughout Guangzhou.

Reaction from Guangdong

3. (SBU) Upon learning of the SCMP article, Post called its
contacts Mr. Luo Jun, Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs
Officer (FAO) Consular Division, who has been our regular
contact regarding AI issues and possible increased
collaboration with U.S. experts (see ref B). Luo said that
the SCMP article was "not true." Luo said he had spoken
with Feng Shaomin, the Guangdong Health Department

spokesman, who said the SCMP article was "made up." Unlike in the earlier case of AI in March, Luo was diligent in returning Post's request via phone and text message.

Reaction from Hong Kong

14. (SBU) The Environmental, Science, Technology and Health (ESTH) Officer in Hong Kong also confirmed the negative test results with the Hong Kong Government (HKG). The HKG official said that since Ms. Li tested negative for both H5N1 and SARS, the HKG considers the case "closed."

Comment: "Just the Facts Ma'am"

15. (SBU) The recent SCMP article incident demonstrates the benefit of maintaining an objective view towards AI cases in South China. While the SCMP merely reported the issue as a "suspected case," it and other media can also tilt toward sensationalism in their coverage. Additionally, government officials can be timely and open with their replies. It is encouraging that the Ministry of Health shared information about the case five days after the victim admitted to a hospital.

16. (SBU) It is important to note there are a number of medical issues that make timely reporting difficult. If a patient is not present at a hospital until after day 8, health officials may not be able to determine the disease until day 21. The optimal time to test is between day 3 and day 5. So there are a lot of cases that remain "suspect" until an anti-body test can be performed on day 21.

17. (SBU) The problem in Guangdong is that distance from

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Beijing's Central Government means bureaucrats in Guangdong must wait longer for official permission to report. Additionally, local officials are not allowed to report cases until it has been confirmed and announced by the central government (this policy is considered reasonable by both the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and WHO). In a recent special briefing for Consulate officials (reftel A), Guangdong Public Health officials actually stated that they are allowed to report even suspected cases to diplomatic or media officials. This procedure has yet to be seen in practice. Post will monitor how timely and open Guangdong officials are when they respond to future cases, especially when they are less confident about the facts of the case.

18. (U) This cable has been cleared with Consulate Hong Kong.

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